Old-Time Rulers of North Tottering?

By FARLEY MOWAT

ESKIMOS GLIMPSE FREEDOM

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND how we have been misled into thinking of the Eskimo as a funny little fellow, not quite human, living in an igloo and eating blubber all the time, we need to know something about the history of white domination of the Eskimos.

It is a revealing history.

Until 1953 the Canadian Arctic was under the effective control of three great empires, only one of which had an official responsibility to Canada and to Canadians.

These were the missions, the traders, and the RCMP.

Among them, they exerted absolute control over the Eskimos and all three had a common concept—that the Eskimo was a simple child of nature, a lesser breed outside the law; and that it was to everyone's advantage (including the Eskimo's) to keep him that way.

They did a pretty good job. Until 1954 not more than a score of Eskimos had escaped the myth, and publicly demonstrated alongside their fellow Canadians that they were men, and good men at that.

It was almost impossible for them to escape from their environment. They were insulated from us by barriers of language and experience, which the three great empires had done little to remove.

During half a century of mission educational activity, fewer than 8 per cent of all the Eskimos acquired any knowledge of English or French, and most of these learned our languages outside the mission schools.

Nor could they share our common experiences. It seemed to be accepted as dogma that an Eskimo could never do white man's work; live according to our standards, or even survive in a southern climate—and the empires gave them very little encouragement to try.

CONSTANT CONFLICT

But adherence to this evaluation of the Eskimos was the only thing which DID unite the three empires. For the rest they were in constant conflict—and the Eskimo was usually the unhappy neutral in the middle.

The traders resisted any influence which might wean the Eskimo away from his obvious purpose in life, as a gatherer of furs for the trading company. In their defence it must be said that they did more for Inuk in a physical sense than many of the missions did, though their help was hardly disinterested.

A hungry Eskimo was seldom turned away from a trading post, for the very sound reason that a starving man isn't much use as a trapper.

The missions—Church of England and Roman Catholic—were equally determined that their influence should be paramount over the Eskimos.

They often displayed what appeared to be indifference to the Eskimos' physical well-being. This attitude was frankly admitted by an American Oblate in the Mackenzie district who was quoted in Maclean's magazine in 1957 as saying "We figure the missionary comes before the doctor. It's more important to get into heaven than to be cured of TB."

Primarily they were interested in souls, though some of them were also interested in furs, and even today at least one Oblate mission holds a trading licence.

STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL

In almost every Arctic trading outpost the traders and missionaries struggled for control of the Eskimos; and in a good many places I personally have observed evidence that the opposing missions competed with each other in a manner that seemed to me distinctly un-Christian. And I was informed that the situations I saw were chronic.

The RCMP were in a special category. Latecomers to the area, their primary job was to show the flag. However, they soon developed their own empire and here they were supreme, for they were the nearest approximation to government in the country.

Consequently they felt that they should be the paramount influence over the "natives" (as

This is the second article in a series by Farley Mowat.

This man, a successful Canadian author, is waging a single-handed war for the Eskimo's emancipation. He considers Canada's treatment of her northern natives scandalous. And he has harsh words to say about the missions, the traders and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the great north.

This old Eskimo does not look like the fur-robed and cheerful Inuk of the myth.

they still refer to the Eskimos even in their official correspondence) and they worked assiduously toward that end. It was seldom that any love was lost between the police and the other two great powers.

Oh, happy Eskimo in those brave times! He was bound by the trader by the "debt" system (He seldom got out of debt from one year to the next). He was expected to look upon the trader as a paterfamilias and to obey his instructions to the letter.

But on the other hand the missionary expected the Eskimo to favor him above all others, and even to bring furs to some missions as tithes or in exchange for meagre trading goods.

If there were two missions in the area, both missionaries often spent much of their time trying to undermine each other's influence. (It is not to be wondered at that, even amongst the characteristically peaceful Eskimos, there were a number of well-authenticated cases of confused Innuit murdering their brothers because they were of an opposing faith.)

And then, on top of all this, there were the RCMP, many of whose field personnel subscribed wholeheartedly to the Great White Father complex, issuing orders to the Eskimos military style, and demanding unquestioning obedience from "the natives."

While this was the state of things in the Arctic, we southern Canadians were sticking to a policy of complete laissez faire. Once a year a government party journey north on the Ss Nascopie on a tour of inspection and to supply stations. Usually a doctor and a dentist went along.

This six-week visit—sometimes it was shorter—during which only about a quarter of the Eskimo population was seen, was presumed to be adequate supervision of the health and general welfare of 11,500 people for a year. The fact that until 1954 no one even knew how many Eskimos there were, is a good indication of the effectiveness of what I consider was no more than an annual gesture of ours.

It is also worth noting that two of the three great empires of the north were not essentially Canadian. Most of the traders came from Scotland and Newfoundland (before it became a province of Canada) while most missionaries of at least one faith came from Belgium and France. They built what, so far as the average Canadian was concerned, amounted to foreign empires on soil (well, on rock and ice) that we had abandoned to them. It is hardly to be wondered at that they were not greatly concerned about the rights of those Canadian citizens who lived in igloos and called themselves Innuit.

Incredibly, it was not until 1953 that we began to have twinges of unease about the Eskimos. By then the effects of United Nations censure of other countries who permitted the exploitation of indigenous peoples, had at last begun to sensitize our consciences. And, too, it was a little awkward for us to be righteously indignant about the American Negro problem while we continued to tolerate a state little better than serfdom for our own Eskimos.

BELATED ACTION

At any rate, in 1953 the Canadian Government belatedly gave administrative, co-ordinating and development authority in the Arctic to the new-born Department of Northern Affairs.

From that moment the days of the great Arctic empires appeared to be numbered. But the old order is not easily abandoning its special status.

Though the traders publicly bow to the new order, they are still resisting where they can. For instance, they do not like the idea of Eskimo co-operatives, and should not be surprised to see them soon begin to portray themselves as suffering business men trying hard to make a dollar in the face of the incipient threat of socialistic monopolies of the robber-baron Eskimos.

The missions are divided. The Anglicans seem no longer to resist change, but not so the Oblates. They make no bones about their conviction that the invasion of government into their preserves is intolerable, and that it is doing the Eskimos irreparable damage.

They are putting up a worthy fight.

Even the police regret the passing of the old dictator status, at least, on the individual level, and many of them are not disposed to co-operate with the new order.

CHILL RECEPTION

When the Department of Northern Affairs' Northern Service Officers first went north in 1954, many of them met a reception that was chillier than an Arctic storm. The consensus amongst the old-time empire builders was that the sooner these "interfering amateurs" went home, the better. That opinion is still held by many.

This summer I heard it forcefully expressed by two policemen, and by almost all the missionaries and traders whom I met during a tour of Keewatin territory.

However, even the fact that some of the NSOs have been incompetent does not justify a blanket condemnation of this new service, a condemnation, incidentally, that I have never heard expressed by a single Eskimo.

It would be wrong to assume that the powers of the old empires have been dissipated. They are still waging a determined campaign to retain effective control of the Eskimo.

As for that maltreated fellow, after a century of struggle he is still alive, but the battleground is a pitiful and desolate place, and he is in urgent need of first-aid treatment.

NEXT WEEK: Suffering in Silence.